



The Ames Intelligencer

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The LUSTRON — House of Steel

by Sharon Wirth

In the late 1940's, as a young married couple, Ed and Irene Swanson searched for a reasonably priced house to purchase. They were in Ames, Iowa, and Ed worked at Iowa State University. They had looked at a number of structures but all the necessary details never fell into place.

But, in 1948 it seemed luck was on their side. Ed and Irene visited a model Lustron home located in Des Moines.

For only \$7-\$8,000, a home with built-ins could be purchased, so the Swansons made a down-payment of \$50 and ordered a home. They purchased land to put it on and waited for the house to arrive.

Lustron houses were a fairly new idea. The Swansons had seen a metal house on display at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago. The housing company was running lovely color ads in Life Magazine, billing the Lustron as the home of the future — efficient, low maintenance, and reasonably priced.

Some of Ed's colleagues at ISU had advised them that these houses were a good buy. Buyers knew exactly what they were getting from the gray metal exterior to all the room dimensions to the heating system.

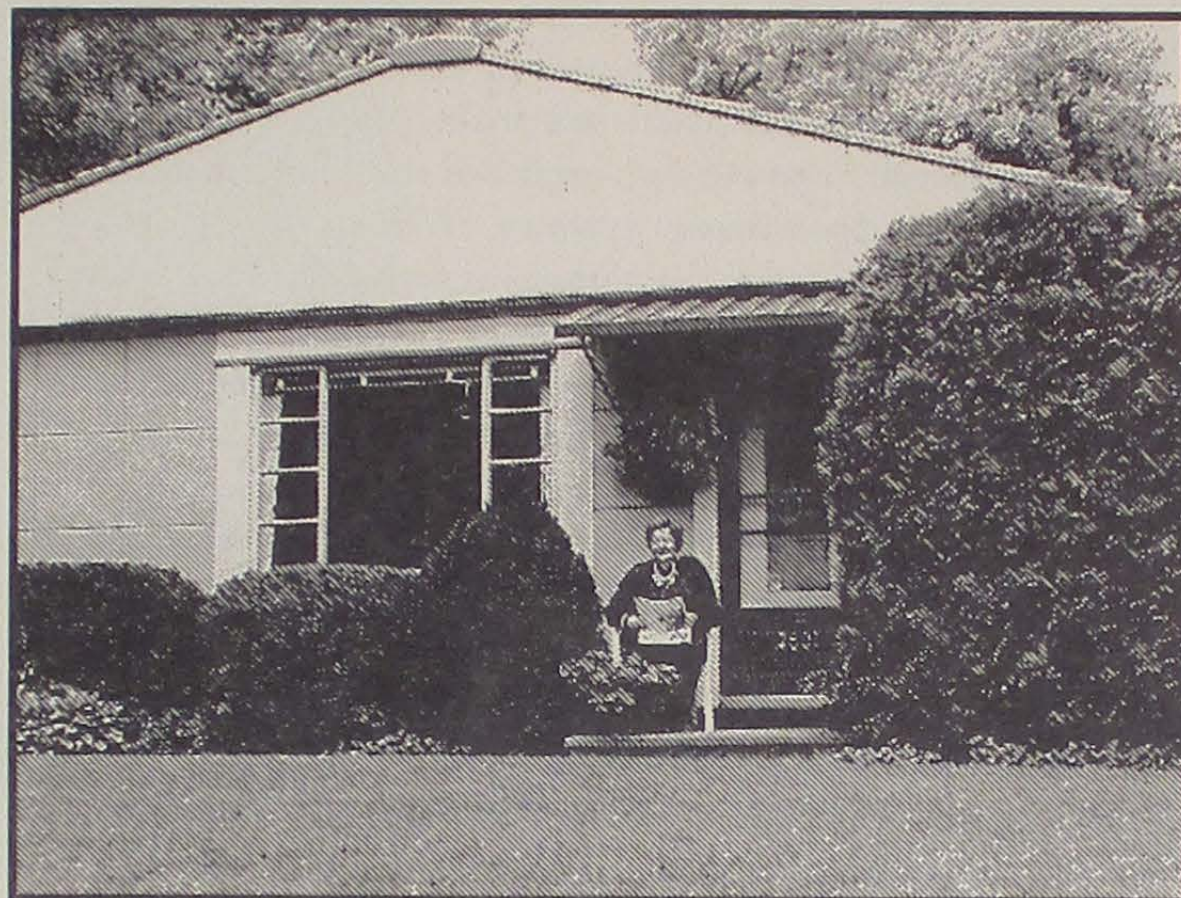
The Swansons waited anxiously for their house to arrive, pleased that their search for housing was ended, or so they thought. But as fate would have it, soon their deposit was returned

with a letter stating Lustron homes were no longer available. Disappointed, they looked at other houses in Ames but nothing worked out. Irene still thought about those Lustron houses.

The Swansons now had three children. Still living on the Iowa State campus, the housing question was getting to be a very pressing issue. In April of 1953, while in Des Moines for dinner, they saw a sale ad for, of all things, a Lustron house. "This is a special custom job with extra equipment and arrange-



Each LUSTRON house came with a medallion which included the model and serial number.



Irene Swanson still enjoys her unusual LUSTRON house, made of 14 tons of steel.

ment. There is no other new Lustron Home of this size available anywhere. You are very lucky to be able to get hold of

...this was no ordinary house. It was made of 14 tons of steel. No wood was used in its construction. The exterior finish is porcelain enamel.

this home. Size is 48 x 31," the ad read. With their hopes high, Ed drove to Norway (near Cedar Rapids) the next day. He was the first one to have \$10,000 cash and the home was theirs.

Lustron homes did not

become widely available as was originally planned, and this was no ordinary house. It was made of 14 tons of steel. No wood was used in its construction. The exterior finish is porcelain enamel.

Lustron houses were the idea of Carl G. Strandlund, president of the Lustron Company. In 1946 he went to Washington, D.C. seeking steel to make porcelain enamel panels for use in building filling stations. Steel was in short supply following World War II, and he was told that the available steel was reserved for housing. Wilson Wyatt, President Truman's new Housing Administrator, asked him to build houses with the steel panels rather than filling stations.

With this encouragement,

continued on next page

LUSTRON HOME, *cont.*

Strandlund worked to adapt the principles of the automobile industry to the production of housing. They would design and produce a complete house at the factory, ship it to a dealer, and it would then be erected on the owner's site. Use of metal rather than wood allowed the substitution of welding for carpentry and other mass production processes. The factory was producing 12 houses a day in January of 1949.

The Swansons, now with over 3300 pieces of steel, turned to transforming them into a home. Arriving by truck, the pieces

At age 82, Irene is still thrilled with her LUSTRON house.

were unloaded and laid out on their lot at the corner of Hunt and Hayward. Each weekend a crew of three experienced builders arrived from Cedar Rapids where 22 Lustron houses had been built. They worked side-by-side with Ed to erect the house. Working four weekends and paid approximately \$1300 plus meals and lodging for their work, the house was erected on a full basement. Local business people probably were not happy about the fact that the Swansons did not need to buy their products to build this house.

Today the house is much as it was then. Neither the interior nor exterior has needed repainting. It has not been reroofed. Changes that have occurred include minor changes in the kitchen, carpeting, installation of central air, and the addition of a garage. Ed died in 1987.

In 1988, daughter Kay Craig and her two daughters, Suzy and Kathy, moved back to share the

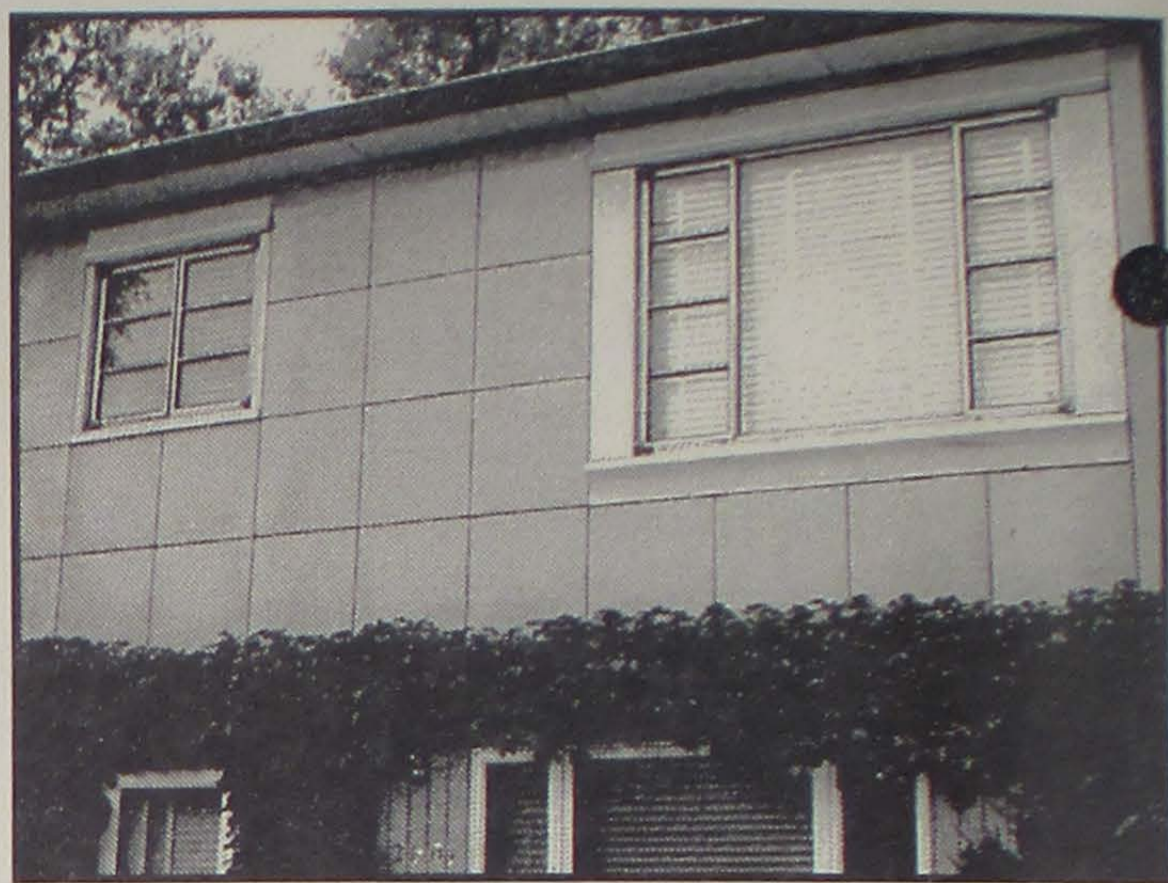
house with Irene. It's an inter-generational house and functions beautifully says Irene. She laughs when telling how her grandchildren are disappointed they can't hang things with magnets at their home like they can on those metal walls at Grandma's. At age 82, Irene is still thrilled with her Lustron house.

What happened to the Lustron house concept? It seemed perfect—well built, reasonably priced, quickly produced and low in maintenance. Why do we not see them in profusion today nearly 50 years later?

To answer these questions we must look back to the beginning of the Lustron Corporation. With the end of World War II, the United States desperately needed more housing. One answer to this shortage was prefabricated housing.

The Lustron Corporation was one of the largest housing manufacturers following the war. Carl Strandlund dreamed that everyone could buy their own low maintenance home at a reasonable price. Lustron houses were made of steel enameled panels and designed with a number of built-ins, radiant heat, ample closet space and an automatic dishwasher that also did the family laundry.

By 1949 the federal government had loaned the Lustron Corporation over 37 million dollars to produce these prefabricated metal houses. An aircraft plant in Columbus, Ohio, was leased to be converted to an assembly line plant for the housing production. Problems persisted from the beginning. Start-up costs and tool-up time were underestimated. The plant, at its peak, produced 26 homes per day rather than the intended 100 per day. To break even, it needed to produce a minimum of 50 per day. This



This view of the east side of the house clearly shows the porcelain enamel panels that were used to build the house. Today, 43 years after being built, the structure still has not needed repainting.

low production rate increased the per house price to very near that of a wood frame house. The houses were popular with the public; so popular, dealers could not supply enough houses to meet the demand.

Other problems included reluctance on the part of lenders to make loans for the steel

These homes helped ease the crunch for affordable housing following World War II.

homes. Local building codes sometimes required that the copper plumbing installed at the factory be replaced with locally required cast iron and galvanized piping. This increased the cost of the home. In many areas there were no experienced crews available for on-site assembly. The lack of skilled crews increased the assembly time, thus, increasing the cost of the house. And, the demand for housing was beginning to wane.

By June, 1949, the Lustron Corporation was behind in its short-term loan payments and

behind in the number of houses it promised to produce. The houses were selling well but more time and more cash were needed to keep the company going.

Carl Strandlund went to Washington, DC to ask for more money. There was political pressure on Strandlund to step down as president of the company. When he refused, loans were foreclosed and the company closed down on June 6, 1950. During the three years of operation just under 2500 Lustron homes had been produced. Some felt that no venture of this magnitude could have been expected to succeed in just three years.

These homes helped ease the crunch for affordable housing following World War II. Although they could not be produced as quickly as originally predicted, they were durable and well designed. Many still stand today fulfilling the original promise of quality and affordable home ownership. In Ames, only one was built and today it is still occupied by the original owner, Irene Swanson. The house is an important part of Ames' housing history and the story of the Lustron Corporation.

Memorials and Donations

The Association acknowledges these gifts:

In memory of Polly Gossard, given by Polly's daughter, Margaret Gossard Story for Hoggatt School.

In memory of Vivian Maxine Smedal, given by Evie and Tom Thielen for the Bauge Home.

In memory of Leda Bauge Barrie, given by friends and family for the Bauge Home, Leda's childhood home.

- For Hoggatt School, Board member Don Faas donated an 1862-63 era reproduction flag, replacing the one that was lost during a break-in at the school.
- Neta Snook Questors, Ames, has pledged \$600 toward the Bauge Home restoration.
- Ames Friday Noon Kiwanis has donated \$300 toward the museum development project.
- Historic Old Town Neighborhood archives have been contributed to AHA collection.
- Items belonging to Sarah Emery, Ames' first school teacher, were given by Margaret Gossard Story.

News BITS

The 1915 City Hall was named a Local Landmark in 1991, at the request of the Ames Heritage Association. Youth and Shelter Services, the current owner, is in the process of applying for placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Will Page, a Des Moines consultant, is preparing the application.

Watch for Celebrating Our Story, the Story County Sesquicentennial traveling exhibit. Featuring 16 panels relating the histories of each town in Story County, it will be at the Ames Public Library the week of July 14. The exhibit is making the rounds of Story County festivals and celebrations this summer, and may tour the county again in the fall.

The Association will sponsor an exhibit of 1915 City Hall cornerstone artifacts in the display case in the lobby of City Hall during the month of July.



**THE
STORY
CENTER**

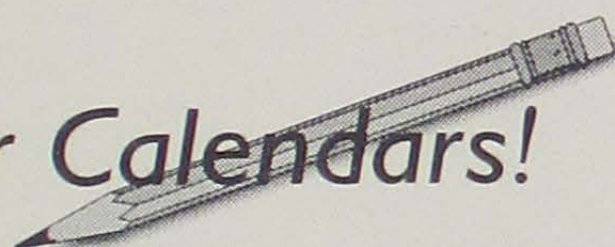
Museum/Cultural Center Planning

On April 9, the Ames City Council approved several requests by the Association for museum development.

Council members agreed to:

- provide \$8000 toward museum planning for 1996-97
- begin thinking about what is appropriate civic support for such a facility
- provide staff assistance in selecting a consultant for a feasibility study
- place survey questions in the 1996 Resident Satisfaction Survey
- open discussions on the re-use of the water treatment plant site for the museum.
 - ♦ The monetary allocation will fund a quarter-time graduate student from ISU's History Department. This person will work 10 hours/week for 9 months on a variety of projects associated with the museum project including assessment surveys, collections development and programs.
 - ♦ An HRDP/REAP grant application has been submitted to assist in doing an extensive feasibility study. The Historic Resources Development Program is part of the Resource Enhancement And Protection (REAP) fund established by the Iowa Legislature using lottery funds. A total of \$17,700 was requested. Notification will occur October 1.
 - ♦ At a June 25 City Council meeting, museum planning committee members asked the City Council what was the next step in procuring the site south and east of Highways 30 & 69. Council indicated they would entertain a request, and asked that the Parks and Recreation Department be consulted with about their plans for a new city park at the site. Museum committee members hope to return to Council with a request later this summer.

Mark Your Calendars!



HISTORIC HOME TOUR

The HISTORIC HOME TOUR, including homes and notable Main Street buildings, will be held September 28 & 29, from 1:30-4:30pm. For more information, call Sharon at 233-2415 or Debbie at 232-7985.

1915 CITY HALL DISPLAY

The Association will sponsor an exhibit of 1915 City Hall cornerstone artifacts in the display case in the lobby of City Hall during the month of July.

1996-1997 Board

SERVING THROUGH 1999:
Bill LaGrange, Nancy Osborn, Kathy Svec, Sharon Wirth, Kay Beckett

SERVING THROUGH 1998:
Jack Adams, Coleen Nutty, Rollie Struss, Willie Struss, David Ballard, Jr.

SERVING THROUGH 1997:
Don Faas, Elain Bath, Evelyn Thielen, Lois Vohs



BAUGE LOG HOME

Work Days at the Bauge House

Board members and Association volunteers made a notable difference in the interior of the Bauge home on May 18 and 20. Remaining plaster was scraped from log walls. Flooring was laid in the lean-to using salvaged lumber from a now-demolished house on 7th street. And, with the assistance of a gas generator loaned by the Conservation Board, the house was cleaned with a heavy duty vacuum sweeper.

The 1930's vintage floor boards in the bedroom were taken up, revealing several layers of linoleum and ultimately the original planking into which a trap door had been cut. The true width of the original stair to the second story is now evident, allowing us to effectively plan for the restoration of the stairway to the loft. Stairway re-location will be done later this summer by Falls Millwork of Kelley.

Volunteer workers were Rollie and Willie Struss, Kay and Roger Beckett, Sharon Wirth, Ross Wirth, Dave Wiese, Nancy Osborn, Chad Okere, Jack Adams, Evie Thielen, Ethan Whited, John Whited. Thanks also go to Steve Lekwa for the loan of the generator.

Developing the Story of the Bauge Log Home

The Association has contracted with a museum professional to create an interpretive program for the Bauge Log Home. Leo Landis, who is completing his doctorate at ISU in the Department of History, will apply experience at two living history museums to the task, which is due to be completed by September. Landis will build upon Bauge family materials collected originally by Cele Burnett, Story County Conservation Board environmental educator. The finished program will provide a script for tour guides, to give a lively view of homesteading in Iowa in general and the Bauge family experience in particular.

An open house showcasing the interpretive program is planned for October.

Bauge Log Home Seeks Donations and Volunteers

The Heritage Association is seeking donations of reusable salvage materials, volunteers and dollars to finish restoration of the Bauge family log home.

Funding needs to be secured for the remainder of the major restoration components within the next 12 - 18 months. Donations of any dollar amount are greatly

appreciated, and phases of the project will proceed as funds allow.

Salvage items needed include: 4 - 5 interior doors of a vertical panel design along with hardware, bricks to rebuild two chimneys, field stones for the lean-to foundation, 1x6 pine flooring, tongue and groove in 8 - 10 foot lengths, and beaded ceiling boards. If you know of materials, please call Sharon Wirth at 233-2415 or Rollie Struss at 232-0865 for more detailed information.

Volunteers are also needed to assist during work days at the house planned for this summer and fall. Call the above numbers if you can help.



Ethan Whited of Ames Building Beavers 4-H Club removes floor boards during a recent work day at the Bauge Log House.

Ames Heritage Association Board:

President	Kathy Svec
Vice-president	Don Faas
Secretary	Nancy Osborn
Treasurer	Bill LaGrange

Sharon Wirth, Jack Adams, Coleen Nutty, Lois Vohs, Elaine Bath, Kay Beckett, Rollie Struss, Willie Struss, Evelyn Thielen, David Ballard, Jr.

The Ames Heritage Association is a legally incorporated, not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting interest in state and local history through educational publications, programs and displays. The Board meets the 3rd Monday of each month, September - June. Interested persons are welcome.

The AMES INTELLIGENCER is named after an early Ames newspaper and is published three times a year for Association members. Comments/questions may be directed to the Editor.

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Ames Heritage Association
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